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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on the topic of literacy and politics by answering a question: "Why can't literacy educators seem to reach the politicians?" The discussion in the paper shows how educators and politicians communicate in different languages; when speaking about education educators tend to use their own jargon, while policymakers tend to speak in plain language. The paper offers several suggestions for improving communication between the two groups. Contains 10 references. Attached is a discussion forum in which 11 readers comment on the author's opinions and suggestions. (NKA)

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Literacy and Politics: A Conversation with Myself.

by Allen Berger

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Literacy and Politics: A Conversation with Myself

An Invited Commentary

Allen Berger
Miami University

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments. You may also wish to read a second, related commentary by Allen Berger, Reaching Politicians Through the Media.

For three years I chaired the Commission on the Politics of English Education of the National Council of Teachers of English/Conference on English Education. I have attended a number of Legislative Education Workshops under the auspices of NCTE and the International Reading Association. Closer to home, I've been active in Literacy Educators and Advocates Forum, a group in Ohio that attempts to share ideas with politicians. I have organized and chaired sessions (including ones entitled "Mending Fences with the Media" and "Telling Our Stories through the Media") for NCTE and IRA conventions. I've written articles and kept abreast of discussions about literacy and politics on the listserv of the National Reading Conference, a group of approximately 400 leading literacy researchers in many countries. I've read and reread publications extending from Neil Postman's "The Politics of Reading," published nearly three decades ago in the *Harvard Educational Review* and which turned into a book of the same name (edited by Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann, 1973), to his relatively recent work, *The End of Education* (the title of which has a purposeful double meaning); this week I read Kenneth S. Goodman's edited volume, *In Defense of Good Teaching: What Teachers Need to Know about the "Reading Wars"*, and Denny Taylor's *Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science*, both published last year.

I mention this not for purposes of self-aggrandizement but with a feeling of sadness about what it all has shown me. Here we are, some of the most privileged, educated people in a profession that prides itself on literate communication, and we can't seem to pull it together to communicate our concerns effectively to policy makers after more than a quarter of a century of trying.

What follows is the first of two commentaries on the topic of literacy and politics I've been invited to contribute to *Reading Online*. (The second is scheduled to appear in June.) This one relates a conversation I had with myself while walking to work one morning a week or two ago.

Question: *Why can't literacy educators seem to reach politicians?*
Answer: There are a couple of reasons. One is that we're babes in the woods in communicating with politicians. Another is that, with rare exceptions, we don't truly want to make the effort.

What do you mean?
Politicians speak a different language. I once heard S.I. Hayakawa, the former college professor, semanticist, and university president who became a United States senator. He explained some major differences between educators and politicians. He said that educators are cruelly blunt. At meetings we tend to say things like, "That's stupid. Anyone who says that doesn't know what he's talking about." In the same situation, a politician would say something like, "Everyone knows that my inestimable colleague is extremely intelligent, but on this one particular point she doesn't appear to have all the facts."

What else?
Hayakawa also pointed out that in politics your enemy today is your friend tomorrow. It all depends on what you're voting on. But in education, your enemy today is your enemy for the next 30 years.

How can we in education take advantage of these observations when we try to reach politicians?
What we need to remember is that politicians are interested in votes and they are interested in clear language.

So, what's the problem? Educators communicate clearly.
No, we don't. When I was at the University of Pittsburgh, a graduate student and I sent the following one-sentence question to all 50 state governors and to hundreds of educators: "If it were in your power, what one thing would you do to improve the reading and writing skills of boys and girls?" We received hundreds of replies. Both groups emphasized the need to have support from the home, but the governors, or their aides, wrote in clear language and tended to use lay terms while the educators used education-ese (Berger & Rattigan, 1984).

How can that be?
Which sort of phrase is clearer to an ordinary person: "integrate the language arts" (found in responses from many educators) or "put books in homes" (which came from many politicians)?

Why don't we communicate clearly?
For many reasons. Some educators even praise obscure language. In *Breaking Free*, a book discussed one summer over the listserv by members of the National Reading Conference, the critical pedagogists (representing an educational movement) state that "writing clarity represents a pernicious mechanism used by academic liberals who suffocate discourses different from their own" (Freire & Macedo, 1996, p. 216). With an attitude like that, how will we ever communicate? Incidentally, I ran a readability formula on a number of random parts of this Harvard University Press–published book, and the readability ranged from the 20th- to the 26th-grade levels.

What else?
We love jargon. Actually, love is not the right word. We are entranced; we are hypnotized by it.

But every profession has its jargon and technical terminology.
That's true, and I don't want to go into the difference between jargon and technical terminology. But if a profession wants to communicate with the public, it needs to use simple, clear English.

What did you mean when you said we don't want to make the effort to communicate with politicians?
We'd rather talk to ourselves. This is the way I began an article (Berger, 1995) that appeared a few years ago in the *Cincinnati Post:* "One of the things that strikes me as wrong with educators is that we talk to ourselves too much. Now there's a lot right with that: it's what in part makes a profession. But what's wrong is that while we're communicating with each other in educational publications, others are talking about us in other publications."

But how do we learn to talk to people outside education?
I go into detail about this in "Writing about Reading for the Public" (Berger, 1997a), which I'm told has been mentioned favorably in keynote addresses by Carol Rasco, director of President Clinton's reading initiative. Along with another piece, "Let's Mend Fences with Our Newspapers" (Berger, 1997b), the article gives a great deal of specific information on how to communicate with the public and, through the public, to policy makers.

What did you mean when you wrote that "others are talking about us in other publications"? Which publications?
The Public Interest, *Commentary*, *Daedalus*. Our critics write in them. I would venture to guess that few teachers or teacher educators have ever read a copy of these periodicals, but what appears in them finds its way into the popular media.

Why don't educators write in them?
We like to talk among ourselves and blame others. A few years ago I was at a luncheon in Columbus, Ohio, with some hundred people, including a handful of politicians who had actually come to learn and contribute. Toward the end of the luncheon, a number of educators came to a floor microphone to complain about how hard it was to reach politicians; in fact, one began berating them. Finally, one of the political leaders stood up and said that she was dismayed at listening to all the whining and criticism, told the educators to do something more constructive, and walked out. She became the target for the rest of the luncheon.

Any other reasons?
In a nutshell -- without getting into the whole of the old reward system -- communicating to policy makers is not high on the promotion-tenure-salary totem pole at most universities. In fact, it may even be detrimental

to one's career.

So, what are you suggesting?
I'm suggesting that we need to follow our consciences and be realistic. If we're not going to contribute directly to a politician's campaign, we can still be helpful in other ways. In both 1997 and '98, NCTE adopted thoughtful resolutions dealing with inappropriate governmental intrusion into education. Share them with politicians. NCTE has 70,000 members; IRA has 90,000. Even though many educators belong to both organizations and many members are citizens of other nations, those numbers still represent a lot of bright voters here in the United States. But it's not enough to rely on organizations to communicate; individual members need to communicate, too. In addition, individual educators -- and there are millions of individual educators -- need to communicate with local politicians. (You know the saying: "All politics is local.") If you can't reach the politician, talk to a member of his or her staff. Follow up with a letter or e-mail. Be polite. Write clearly. Be rational. Don't be naive. Know that there is a small percentage of politicians whose goal is to drastically change the power structure in public education. Perhaps members of that group could profit from a field trip to your classroom. (Remember, though, that if they accept your invitation, you and your students need to be prepared to answer the questions they may ask. Remember, too, that a few may be beyond hope and will do anything, including using censorship, to create dissension between public schools and the public.) Know also that many politicians care little about sound educational research; they're moved by anecdotes. So give them a few anecdotes. Tell them some success stories. Try a little humor. Hire an Art Buchwald. Or a Dave Barry.

Is there anything else?
There's a quip that goes something like "I would have written you a shorter letter but I didn't have the time." Like you, politicians are busy people. If you want your views to be appreciated, you need to take the time to express them effectively. Keep it short -- one well-written page is plenty. Here's a way to focus: if you were the education czar and could do any three things, what would they be? State your choices and provide brief, persuasive rationales for them.

What can IRA and NCTE do?
In addition to overseeing things on the national level, IRA and NCTE can increase attention to the important work of their state affiliates and councils. Some already cooperate with helpful groups outside of education, such as the League of Women Voters and the National Council of Jewish Women. In Ohio, citizens from the business sector and other walks of life participate in a group called the New Ohio Institute; another Ohio group is BEST (Building Excellent Schools for Today and the 21st Century), chaired by a senior vice-president of Procter & Gamble. People in such organizations offer an array of expertise. Professional organizations in education can use their state- and local-level structures to reach out to these groups nationwide in order to establish partnerships for working in concert with them.

Is there anything we shouldn't do?
One thing we *should* do is stop forming committees to try to figure out what to do. We already know what to do, and some literacy educators are doing it. We should emulate them. Toward the end of one of the fine books I've mentioned, Denny Taylor concludes that we should "Shout! Shout! Shout!" I appreciate the frustration behind that suggestion. But, with all due respect, I think it's doubtful that shouting will be a successful strategy. Politicians and their aides who appear at conferences should not have to fend off the loud, outspoken frustrations of audience members. Let's bear in mind that politicians (regardless of whether their views are similar to our own) are not our enemies; most are decent people of good will who want the best for our states and nation. If we literacy educators have a hard time communicating with them and other segments of society, including the media, let's stop being defensive about it, take some steps, and accept our share of the responsibility.

Author's Note: My appreciation to state representative Gene Krebs of Ohio for taking the time to read this commentary and to phone and share his views before its publication. -- *Allen Berger, January 8, 1999*

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Berger (e-mail, bergera@muohio.edu) is the Heckert Professor of Reading and Writing at Miami University, 400-A McGuffey Hall, Oxford, Ohio 45056, USA. He has worked as a reading and English teacher and a newspaper reporter, and is the author of more than 400 publications on reading and writing education, including Teens for Literacy: Promoting Reading and Writing in Schools and Communities (with Elizabeth Shafran; International Reading Association, 2000).

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Transcript of the Discussion Forum

Editors' Note: When this article was posted in *Reading Online* in January 1999, readers were invited to comment on it through a bulletin board feature that was discontinued when the journal was redesigned in July 2000. Following are the comments posted to that bulletin board.

Readers who would like the opportunity to comment on this or other articles in the journal are invited to contact the author directly or to post messages through ROL Communities.

Post 1

Author: Krista Schwarz _Schwarz
Date: 07-08-1999 12:12

Wow! It's about time someone has come forward with the truth! I could not be in more agreement with Dr. Berger. Educators often use jargon when trying to convey a message, and the message is interpreted a million different ways because no one is quite sure what is really being said. Politics is so important when it comes to education because it is so dependent upon the government to survive. It is essential that educators learn how to clearly and concisely say exactly what they mean. In addition, I also think educators need to keep the same idea in mind when writing articles for publication. I have read any number of articles that used so many terms that were unfamiliar to me, that the entire meaning was lost by the time I finished, if I even made it to the end. Whatever I was supposed to learn was not learned, and the end result was only a feeling of frustration.

Reply 1a

Author: Diane_Hartwig
Date: 07-11-1999 12:58

Finally, perhaps someone who is speaking our own language. I will often read articles where it seems the politicians do not really know what goes on inside the classroom. Then they offer suggestions and speak right over our heads. As an educated person I should understand what they are saying, but sometimes I think the intent is to "sound smart" and then everyone else feels like "well they must know what they are talking about." Do you agree? It's time we all speak the same language and do what is best for the sake of our children's futures.

Reply 1b

Author: joanne_lalk
Date: 07-18-1999 15:07

Dr. Berger has the courage to say what many educators and our mentors do not. That would be the truth--clear, consice, to the point, not trying to hurt anyone, truth. Rather than "Shout! Shout! Shout!" Berger suggests a more sensitive, educated approach to gaining a politician's attention. Devotion to your cause, time, patience, flexibility, and a respect and responsibility for others is key. Growing up in a family of educators, I was constantly in a state of concern for education, students, their families, and my own education. One key element from these conversations with family was missing, and I didn't grasp it until I came to Miami--the griping. My professors, my fellow students, even some cooperating teachers have this obsession with laying blame anywhere but on themselves--now it is the proficiency examinations! In the 15 years since I have become interested in education, and sat listening, unnoticed on the stairwell at night, I have not heard my parents bellyache about the state of schools, or place blame on the students, parents, politicians, co-workers, society...it was always about, "gee, how can I go in there tomorrow and change this?". Why can't more educators share these feelings? Well, they do, and you just have to look around--they're the ones making changes quietly while others gripe and moan. They are people like Dr. Berger, (who I was priveleged to have for an education course at Miami) who truly care about the students--the children. He would and has done anything and everything to write, voice, and live out his ideas for better education, and I cannot think of a better man for this forum to emmulate. Congratulations on making believers out of another educator Dr. Berger, and thank you for your article.

Reply 1c

Author: Sande Raabe
Date: 11-22-1999 17:57

Dr. Berger is right, people in education need to be able to talk to the rest of the world in an understandable manner this is true for the people who work in goverment. We as teachers employeour own special language or jargon to give our selves a professional status to each other. Doctors and Lawyers have their special language also. The thing some professionals (in goverment and education) forget is everyone does not know the others language. When we only talk to other teachers and politcians only talk with other politicians we

don't learn how to communicate to each other. Education in this country is a public right granted to every citizen. The problem is we as teachers or so busy teaching we don't have time to make the rules and regulations necessary to run the show we have to leave it up to the people who don't have a background in education or teaching. This is why both sides need to have open doors to each other and step into each others worlds in order to understand each others needs

Reply 1d

Author: jennifer_snevel
Date: 04-20-2000 18:03

The author writes about some very important topics and gives ACTIONS that can be done by readers. I liked the sections on how educators communicate. He is right-it is not always clear. We do have our own jargon, and that isn't always clear to a non-educator. He states many truths when talking about the lack of communication between educators and politicians. Dr. Berger gives some excellent advice on how to write an effective letter to a politician or how to be a part of a larger organization that is being active.

Post 2

Author: Adrienne Huber
Date: 08-03-1999 04:39

I am a literacy researcher at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia and I am currently researching how literacy is being "defined" and assessed in middle schools around the world. If anyone can help me I would be most appreciative.

Reply 2a

Author: steve _vajda
Date: 09-15-1999 17:48

As a new middle school reading and social studies teacher at Wilson Junior High in Hamilton, Ohio, I am new at this, but perhaps I can shed a little light on literacy. In my urban school, we have a wide range of abilities. I teach two Practical Level seventh grade reading classes. While I actually have some good readers and writers, there are two obstacles for me to overcome first. One is getting their attention and keeping it, and the other is trying to convince them that they have something important to say. Being an optimist, after almost three weeks I can see their improvement. While we won't be reading Shakespeare, I believe we will perform at a higher level than anyone could have predicted.

Reply 2b

Author: William Moore
Date: 12-07-1999 12:15

I teach in a middle school in Savannah, GA It is Shuman Middle School, 415 Goebel Ave., Sav. GA, 31405. I am also a student at Georgia Southern University working on my EDD in Curriculum with an emphasis in literacy. If I can help in any way please let me know. Bill Moore wmoore3@bellsouth.net

Post 3

Author: Rebecca_Stone
Date: 03-21-2000 19:13

Dr. Berger presents here such a clear picture of the challenges both educators and politicans face when communicating our educational concerns. I am also pleased that he recognizes the fact that the blame in our difficulties lies not with either side; it is a problem that together both educators and politicians must remedy.

I couldn't help but shake my head when I read this comment because it is all too familiar - "Some educators

even praise obsure language" (2). For three years now at Miami, I have seen students litter papers with 6-syllable vocabulary words they discovered while using the thesaurus on their word processing programs. There is a sense in academia that in order to appear educated to peers and professors, one must communicate using extensive vocabularies and complex structures. One would expect that our language becomes more refined and perfected, not what I call flowered. And when these educated professionals attempt to communicate to politicans, language is operating on two different levels.

Reading this article gave me hope. There are so many things we can all do to eliminate the language barriers that exis, such as involving ourselves in IRA and NCTE, communicate with politicians on local levels, and writing short, well-written letters. Yet the most important thing to remember when doing all of these things is clarity!! We must be understandable to be understood. Only then will we communicate our concerns effectively.

Reply 3a

Author: Anne_Batty
Date: 04-17-2000 19:20

I don't think that Politicians are out there to give us the short end of the stick every time. I don't believe that they want to just ignore the demands and worries of the educators. I believe they want to help us. They want to give us all that we need in order to educate the future voters of our nation. They understand that we are the teachers of the next generation and that the next generation needs to be educated.

I agree with Dr. Berger that we, as educators (specifically English teachers), are talking in a way that is not easily understood without a good dictionary and a working knowledge of the educational jargon of the time. Why can't the educators of this world get together and make a concise argument about what we need? Because as Dr. Berger said "we like to talk among ourselves and blame others." We do blame others without first looking at where we may be at fault. We wouldn't accept this behavior by our students so why are we accepting it among ourselves. We use the jargon and six syllable terms because the words allow us an out. When we don't get the response we want, we can say that the politicain didn't really read what we said or listen to our needs. We are the victoms because we communicated with the politicain, but the politician brushed our concerns under the table.

Sometimes I believe that educators forget that they are not the only ones who are busy. We need to sit down and realize that the politicians are dealing with more than just educational concerns and that they need to be spoken and written to in the same way as we would talk to any other busy person. We need to learn to get a point across quickly. We need to learn to be clear. We need to drop the overly-jargoned speeches and just say it like it is. Ask for what we need and explain why we need them. But, be quick about it.

Post 4

Author: Erin_Doyal
Date: 04-20-2000 12:41

I found myself physically nodding my head in agreement with this article. I found, however, that it left out one factor that I believe that educators should consider. Who do we go to? With so many different government offices we need to begin to educate ourselves as to where to go when we want something changed. My father is the type of man that notices problems and wants to get them fixed. Too often, when he questions the way things are, he receives the answer, "That's just our policy, sir". His response? "Who set the policy and who can change it?" That is one of the questions that I think we should begin to answer for ourselves as educators. We need to know where and who to go to or we will keep running in circles.

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